



TERESA E ALEXANDRE SOARES DOS SANTOS
INICIATIVA EDUCAÇÃO

Teaching or confusing the students? What the research tells us about the idea that «the teaching method must be varied»

Belgium and several other countries are discussing the possibility to base pedagogical choices on the competencies approach, the discovery approach, and pedagogical differentiation. Based on recent research, Clermont Gauthier, Steve Bissonnette and Marie Bocquillon criticise those proposals, but they point out that the teacher's action must maintain a stable orientation and vary learning activities according to the subject and the students, and not because of the idea that it is necessary to vary.

02.06.2020 AUTHOR: CLERMONT GAUTHIER, STEVE BISSONNETTE E MARIE BOCQUILLON

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Dupont and Bouchat (2020) have analysed the effects of three pedagogical orientations on the performance of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, namely the **competencies approach**, the **discovery approach**, and **pedagogical differentiation**. These three pedagogical orientations are similar to the approaches recommended by the socio-constructivist reforms which began some thirty years ago in several countries. However, and after having presented several research papers demonstrating the **low efficiency of those three pedagogical approaches**, the same researchers paradoxically conclude and defend a varied approach and the use of different types of pedagogies. **This call to «vary pedagogies»** is common in the field of education, where it is generally preferred to adopt socially acceptable formulae with the different parties involved, **rather than confirming the greater effectiveness of certain pedagogical approaches**. Instead of helping us to gain a better understanding and to act more pertinently, this issue leaves us truly confused and therefore does not constitute a fruitful course of action, since we do not know why we should vary, or what to vary.

In order to avoid perpetuating this confusion, [we have synthesised a framework of analysis with precise criteria](#) that may **guide teachers** in choosing to **vary their teaching activities**.

Although **educational action** is complex and multifaceted, **it must also be stable**. This general principle is precisely what a knowledge base for teaching can identify and analyse. More precisely, the fundamental question of a knowledge base is whether it is possible, through various observations and controlled experiences, to recommend certain teaching strategies. In short, a knowledge base for teaching will be a way of helping the teacher to establish order in a complex and uncertain situation in his/her classroom.

As we have discussed (Gauthier *et al.*, 1997), **a research-driven knowledge base is already available**, which allows for a more effective **management of learning** and **classroom management**. We also have discussed the content of a teaching approach that is part of this knowledge base, **explicit teaching** (Gauthier, Bissonnette and Richard, 2013; Bissonnette, Gauthier and Castonguay, 2016). In short, this is a structured and systematic pedagogical approach that includes three main stages: modelling, guided practice and autonomous practice. It is through explicit teaching and according to those two teaching elements (learning and behaviour management) that we analyse the concept of «varying the teaching method».

Regarding the learning management, there are **four criteria that determine the choice of activities** that the teacher proposes to his/her students:

1. the level of the students;
2. the degree of novelty and complexity of the proposed task;
3. the time available;
4. the fundamental concepts of the curriculum.

When the teacher addresses **students whose levels are low** in relation to learning objects, **when several students experience difficulties**, when **the task** proposed to them **is new or complex**, when **the time** available **is limited**, and **when a fundamental concept is being taught, then the explicit teaching methodology should be used**. These criteria, which are specifically related to the management of learning, will allow the teacher to choose the most relevant activities for his/her students according to the degree of orientation he/she expects to need.

Conversely, when the teacher addresses **students whose levels are high**, when **the** proposed **task is known or simple**, and when **the time** available **is sufficient**, it is possible to **use discovery approaches** in which the level of orientation required is minimal. Secondary concepts can possibly be taught through a discovery approach, but only if the level of the students is high, if the task is simple/knowledgeable, and if the time available is sufficient.

This is undoubtedly where the crucial point lies: it is not a question of varying activities and pedagogical approaches arbitrarily, but rather of varying them if the need for guidance so requires and according to the four criteria mentioned. It is important for **the teacher to adjust the level of orientation of the learning activities** he/she proposes to students according to these elements, and not because of a preconceived idea that «it is necessary to vary pedagogical approaches».

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Furthermore, in relation to **the management of the classroom**, the teacher's task is to control the flow of activities, that is, to **maintain a certain functional order over which**, in the context of a collective work such as that of a classroom, **learning can be successful**. In this case, the first aspect that the teacher should consider is to predict deviations in students' behaviour before they occur, so as to maintain the vector of action that he/she has previously instituted in the classroom. While managing the classroom, **the teacher's challenge is not to force at all costs the variation of activities, but to establish and maintain stability in their functioning**, in order to allow the teacher's performance vector to produce its maximum effects.

Thus, varying learning activities is not a principle that has value in itself. When learning opportunities present themselves and students are engaged in their work, the situation becomes stable and there is no need to change what already works well. On the other hand, if the teacher perceives that there is a need to change the level of orientation regarding the management of learning, he or she can analyse the proposed activities according to the four criteria mentioned. In classroom management, the analysis of the reason that prevents the action vector from developing allows the teacher to make the respective corrections. **The teacher will vary the learning activities if he/she notices signs in the students' behaviour that indicate that the orientation level is not adequate or if he/she is not able to maintain the proposed activity vector.**

Failure to take these elements into account and not adapt the teaching method may contribute to classroom malfunctioning. **Students are not well instructed, just led into confusion.**

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